



Educational Oversight: report of the monitoring visit of London School of Theology, June 2019

Outcome of the monitoring visit

1 From the evidence provided in the annual return and at the monitoring visit, the review team concludes that the London School of Theology (the School) is making acceptable progress with continuing to monitor, review and enhance its higher education provision since the [June 2018 monitoring visit](#).

Changes since the last QAA review/monitoring visit

2 The School enrolled 423 students for the 2018-19 intake, which is a reduction of 93 (18 per cent) comparing with last year's recruitment. There have been a number of staff changes, however, no significant changes in the overall number of academic and administration staff. Changes since last year's monitoring visit include the appointment of a new acting Principal and the development of a new interim strategic plan, 'Restoring Foundations', which identifies the School's key priorities for the next two years.

Findings from the monitoring visit

3 Actions in response to the nine recommendations from the Higher Education Review (Alternative Providers) (HER (AP)) in 2016 have been effectively progressed since the last monitoring visit. Actions in respect of improved risk assessment for placements, the introduction of plagiarism-detection software and the improved monitoring of the engagement of research students have been completed (paragraphs 4 and 6). Actions in respect of internal engagement with the annual monitoring process, trainings for student representatives and the consistent availability of the virtual learning environment (VLE) across the School have been progressed but further actions are required to fully address the recommendations (paragraphs 5, 7 and 8). Following recent staff changes, previously completed actions related to the School's strategic plan in relation to staff development, enhancement and teaching and learning have been revisited in light of a new interim strategic plan, 'Restoring Foundations', which includes priority actions for the next two years with further actions in these areas (paragraphs 4 and 9). The School has maintained the areas of good practice identified in the 2016 review in relation to student engagement, work placement and continues to interview all applicants (paragraph 10). The School has a robust overall approach to admissions and the assessment of students aligned to the requirements of its validating University. New enrolments have reduced this year alongside an increase in reported non-completion rates and the School is taking actions to address this.

4 The School considers the actions in respect of the recommendations from the 2017 review to be largely complete. The School has successfully implemented the use of plagiarism-detection software and has moved to online submission of work for all students. Similarly, a new process for ensuring appropriate risk assessments in relation to work placement has also been implemented. Since 2017 the School has used an annually updated staff development plan, which aligns with a Staff Development Policy. In the last year there has been a focus on developing staff research and training in respect of the role of supervisors. Staff confirmed that the re-introduction of research sabbaticals had been effective in enabling them to undertake academic development.

5 The School has taken steps to improve the monitoring of engagement with research students. Individual supervisory arrangements are confirmed at the beginning of each academic year and guidance notes and training provided to supervisors. Standardised supervision forms are monitored and kept centrally enabling the early identification of issues for concern. Staff and students confirmed that despite the majority of research students being part time, there was a growing research community on site with increased opportunities for students and staff to engage outside of formal supervision sessions.

6 The School has developed its approach to internal engagement with the annual monitoring process. External examiner reports and NSS outcomes are discussed at the Academic Board, whose membership extends to a wide group of academic staff. The annual monitoring report prepared for Middlesex University (the University) is taken to the Board. Staff confirmed their involvement in the process but felt that a better alignment between the internal meetings and University deadlines could make the process more effective enabling the full report to be approved by the Board prior to submission.

7 The School is currently reviewing the role of student representatives in association with the Student Committee in order to improve the effectiveness of the student voice. The Student Body Constitution, which contains role descriptors for both academic and community representatives, has been reviewed and was updated in March 2019. The review is also being informed by recent initiatives at the University. Students the review team met said there was a need for further clarification about their current role and that they would benefit from training.

8 The School has significantly developed its VLE since the review. Materials for online delivery have been improved and include induction and study skills materials as well as programme-based content. The effectiveness of content is monitored by a recently appointed Manager of Online Education, who is focused on ensuring improved engagement and success rates for students studying online and blended programmes. For campus-based programmes, online course materials and discussion board have been introduced but staff and students the review team met confirmed that further work was required to improve the consistency of programme materials for this part of the provision.

9 In 2017 the School implemented a Teaching and Learning Strategy and established an Academic Affairs Committee (AAC) to ensure alignment between the School's educational mission and overall strategy. The AAC receives regular reports from the Academic Dean and reports recommendations to the Board of Trustees. The School has experienced significant staff changes since the review, which have led to the recent production of a new strategic document entitled 'Restoring Foundations', replacing the previous 10-year strategic plan. The new document articulates short-term priorities for the School over the next two years. 'Restoring Foundations' sets out a comprehensive action plan which, in addition to organisational and reputational goals, incorporates issues arising from the annual monitoring action plan prepared for the University and enhancement actions in relation to the recommendations from the HER (AP) review. The document has been prepared by the acting Principal for approval by Academic Board.

10 The School has continued to maintain the three areas of good practice identified in the 2016 review. Practices in relation to work placement and the interviewing all applicants to ensure compatibility with the intended programme of study have continued (paragraph 11). The School has been actively reviewing its approach to formal student engagement alongside maintaining a wide range of informal mechanisms for feedback and discussion. Students the team met confirmed that the level of engagement overall with the School community was a positive aspect of their experience.

11 The School has a robust approach to admissions underpinned by comprehensive policies which is overseen by a new Director of Communications and Engagement. As part of its registration with the OfS, the School has developed an Access and Participation Plan, which sets out its commitment to encouraging applications from mature students and other under-represented groups. It is also reviewing its policies and procedures in order to ensure alignment with consumer protection law. Entry criteria, which include academic, experiential and linguistic requirements are set out in each Programme Specification. Students accepted to study at the School are required to have achieved a minimum 6.5 score in all sections of the Secure English Language Test. All applicants are interviewed either at the School or online which assists in assessing genuine intention to study. Students the review team met confirmed that they had been interviewed and had found this, along with attendance at Open Days and other on campus events, to be useful in informing their decision to study at the School.

12 The School's assessment processes are operated in accordance with its own comprehensive policies which are aligned to those of the University. There is a robust external examiner system, which is overseen by the University and the School is required to make a formal written response to reports received. Additionally, a member of University staff sits on all assessment boards at FHEQ level 5 and above. Students the review team met, confirmed that they were made aware of the School's regulations through induction and materials available online.

13 The School has seen an overall reduction in student numbers by 18 per cent comparing with last year recruitment, despite implementing a strategic approach to recruitment which intended to reverse an ongoing decline in the undergraduate and postgraduate numbers. The School has undertaken a decliners survey as well as a survey of students who do enrol to understand what they perceive to be a poor conversion rate and have identified cost as a significant factor.

14 Additionally, retention in the last year has also been lower than expected. The School reports its non-completion rate (NCR) for undergraduate students studying full and part-time to have increased from 11 per cent in 2016-17 to 23 per cent in 2017-18. Through its Academic Board, the School has acted to understand and address the reasons for this increase. It has identified the need for increased levels of student support and a review of assessment in relation to a strategic increase in the number of students from non-traditional backgrounds. Staff confirmed that changes to the way the NCR was calculated required by data collection in the Higher Education Students Early Statistics (HESES) survey had also contributed to the apparent increase. Additionally, the School has identified that the completion rates for students studying by distance learning are lower than for students on site. A comprehensive range of actions have been taken to address this and in year reporting confirms the effectiveness of actions taken.

Progress in working with the external reference points to meet UK expectations for higher education

15 The School designs its own programmes which are validated by the University ensuring alignment with the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code), FHEQ and relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. The Academic Affairs Committee includes representation from outside the School including a representative from the validating university to ensure the provision is subject to ongoing external review. The School has achieved Office for Students registration having prepared itself for the new regulatory requirements in England and consider staff to be aware of the implications of the revised Quality Code. The School also references to the professional standards of The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) who accredit the BA (Hons)

Theology and Counselling programme. In order to meet BACP requirements the School has implemented in the last year, a new Fitness to Practise Policy.

Background to the monitoring visit

16 The monitoring visit serves as a short check on the provider's continuing management of academic standards and quality of provision. It focuses on progress since the previous review. In addition, it provides an opportunity for QAA to advise the provider of any matters that have the potential to be of particular interest in the next monitoring visit or review.

17 The monitoring visit was carried out by Ms Francine Norris, Reviewer, and Dr Yue Song, QAA Officer, on 4 June 2019.

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